

Waiting game hinges on Curran

■ Perez wants to run for statewide office while at least three are interested in his County Council seat

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In County Council District 5, the waiting game continues — for the incumbent councilman and his would-be successors.

What they're all awaiting is a decision from state Attorney General J. Joseph Curran Jr. (D) on whether he will run for a sixth term.

Councilman Thomas E. Perez (D) of Takoma Park wants to be attorney general, but only if Curran does not run. Perez has already given godfather-like permission to candidates interested in his council seat to begin campaigning unofficially.

"I want to become as irrelevant as possible as soon as possible by identifying tomorrow's leaders," he said.

But that step to irrelevance begins with Curran.

If Curran does step aside, Perez's road to the Attorney General's Office also includes getting past popular and well-financed Montgomery State's Attorney Douglas F. Gansler (D), who also wants the job.

January finance reports — the latest available — showed Gansler with \$1.4 million on hand, compared to Perez's \$203,000. While Perez has stepped up his fund-raising, the financial disparity should not be an issue, he said.

"Campaign reports are just numbers," Perez said. "You don't need to match [an opponent] dollar for dollar. I didn't have the most money in the 2002 [campaign for County Council], and I was most pleased with how we won that election."

Perez defeated three opponents in the 2002 Democratic primary, including Sally Sternbach, who was supported by County Executive Douglas M. Duncan (D).

At the time, Perez was a relative newcomer to Montgomery County politics, and one of the few Latino candidates. His "everyone should have a seat at the table" campaign platform resonated with voters.

"Tom is a very astute politician. He ran a smart race and energized the Latino vote, which hadn't been done before," Sternbach said. "District 5 is a very liberal district and I consider myself a liberal, but Tom out-liberalized me."

Perez has made a name for himself by championing controversial causes such as the prescription drug reimportation and fair housing lending laws.

He has been criticized occasionally for being too concerned with the big picture to focus on the issues of an evolving district.

"Perez has tried to make con-

sumer protection a big issue," said Richard N. Parsons, president of the county's Chamber of Commerce. "I think there is a way to do that without criticizing small business."

Parsons disagreed with Perez on the drug reimportation program because he said county employees were being asked to break federal law by participating, and with the way Perez handled the lending law, which a judge put on hold in March after mortgage brokers began pulling out of the county.

"If [the attorney general race] ends up being Gansler versus Perez, it will be a race of differences," Parsons said.

While Perez's larger legislation has been questioned, most District 5 business and community leaders say they are pleased with his commitment to their issues, such as redevelopment in downtown Silver Spring and amendments to the Wheaton Overlay Zone.

"Whoever wins, District 5 needs someone that is accessible, someone that is responsive, someone who treats our area fairly, someone like Perez was," said Harold Weinberg, president of the Wheaton/Kensington Chamber of Commerce.

So far, three candidates, all Democrats, have emerged in the District 5 County Council race: Takoma Park Council members Joy Austin-Lane and Marc Elrich, and Rock the Vote area director Hans Riemer.

On their agendas are the usual countywide issues of traffic congestion and growth, but in District 5, which is bordered by Washington, D.C., and Prince George's County, crime and policing are also issues.

"Any time you have the cross-jurisdictional borders, there are relationships that need to be enhanced," said Austin-Lane, who abandoned a campaign for the House of Delegates for the County Council race. "We've got to work with police departments in those areas to better manage things like probation, parole and prosecution."

For Reimer, a Silver Spring resident, District 5 is about enhancing town centers in Wheaton and Long Branch, which have not seen the same revitalization as Silver Spring, and building the Purple Line between Bethesda and New Carrollton.

"I get a strong message from District 5 residents in other areas who say Silver Spring is great, but don't forget about us," Reimer said.

For Elrich, affordable housing is a top issue.

"In District 5 we're hemorrhaging affordable housing. We're losing units, through condominium conversions and increasing rents, faster than anybody can create them," said Elrich, who has previously run for at large seats on the County Council. And like Riemer and Austin-Lane, Elrich is focused on town center developments and courting small business.



Perez